

We need every country to recognise that attacks on media freedom are beyond the pale

- [Press release] (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/lord-ahmad-there-is-a-moral-imperative-to-stop-threat-to-media-freedom>) issued at the ministerial meeting on Media Freedom at the UN General Assembly 2019
- [Statement] {<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/we-need-every-country-to-recognise-that-attacks-on-media-freedom-are-beyond-the-pale>} on the conclusion of the ministerial meeting on Media Freedom at the UN General Assembly 2019

Your Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, it's my immense pleasure to be here. I am delighted to be joined here by Amal Clooney, who's the Special Envoy for the UK on the issue, the important issue, of Media Freedom, and in the time since the Conference and the lead up to the Conference that we held over the summer in London, I pay tribute to how she's worked tirelessly on this primary and priority objective for the UK Government.

At this time, I am also truly delighted to welcome on the panel this morning His Excellency, the Prime Minister of Sudan, who really epitomises how change can happen very quickly. Just before we came in I remembered visiting Khartoum not so long ago, and what we've seen happen on the ground so rapidly is a tribute to how civilian rule can be instigated and I'm sure we're very much looking forward to his contribution this morning. Thanks to the efforts of his government, for the first time in three decades Sudan's journalists will be free to report without fear or favour.

I am also delighted that we welcome the UNESCO Director-General here this morning as well and she is representing also of course the Secretary-General in her capacity this morning.

And finally to my right is journalist Jason Rezaian. Many of you know Jason. I said to him this is the first occasion we've had to meet, but I know about him, I've heard about him, and many of you will recall that he was imprisoned for 544 days in Iran, and he'll be speaking about his insights and experience as well.

From our perspective, I'm proud to come from a country that has been a beacon of free speech for more than four centuries, from the abolition of the Licensing Act which set free the printing presses of the 17th century to the invention of television, which changed the landscape of how we receive news.

It is the home of George Orwell, whose caustic criticism of Newspeak and the Thought Police shone light on the chilling totalitarian efforts to silence

the press.

And it is the home of William Russell, who became the first modern war correspondent when he brought the bloody battles of the Crimean War to British broadsheets, shocking a nation with his description of, famously quoted, “the thin red line.”

We have much to be proud of in our rich tradition of media freedom. And yes, like many countries, we are grappling with the balance between free speech, national security and privacy. But those are tough questions we are willing to ask of ourselves.

Because ultimately a free media is essential to any flourishing democracy. It is the bedrock on which all other freedoms are based and indeed preserved.

As Thomas Jefferson poignantly wrote, ““The liberty of speaking and writing [...] guards our other liberties.”

We are gathered here this morning because as member states of the United Nations, we have all long recognised the importance of media freedom in building more just, peaceful and prosperous societies, as reflected in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

We need it to ensure free and open debate. We need it to promote discussion and the exchange of ideas, technological and economic ideas as well as political ones. We also need it to root out corruption, hold governments to account. We need it to inform and engage people around the world, on the issues that matter most to them in their day-to-day lives.

Today, that freedom is under threat. Freedom House reported this year that, and I quote from the report, “Freedom of the media has been deteriorating around the world over the past decade,” – indeed that is true even in the most influential democracies in the world.

In their pursuit of the truth, just for simply doing their jobs, journalists, often in the front line, have become the targets of censorship and intimidation. And too many, too many your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, have paid the ultimate price. We are approaching the anniversaries of the tragic deaths of journalists Martin O’Hagan, Jamal Khashoggi and Daphne Caruana-Galizia.

While the world continues to express its outrage at these and other murders, the violence hasn’t stopped. Just this year, and I’m sure we’ll hear from UNESCO as well, UNESCO itself reports that 41 journalists and media workers have been killed. According to Reporters Without Borders, 383 journalists and media workers are imprisoned in countries such as Turkey, China, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Eritrea.

We must remember journalists like Javid Noori, a citizen journalist who was executed by the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Or the Venezuelan journalist, Luis Carlos Diaz, who was arrested, charged with ‘public incitement’ linked to the nationwide extended blackout in March

and banned from leaving the country.

Or Huang Qi, himself a human rights reporter, who was sentenced to 12 years in a Chinese prison in a flagrant violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

This tide of oppression against free media across the world harms the countries affected, and offends others against the values we hold so dear.

So we all have a moral imperative to stop the threat to media freedom, whether it's violence, unduly restrictive laws and regulations, imprisonment, detention or indeed internet censorship.

Last year, the United Kingdom launched a campaign to shine a global spotlight on this crucial issue.

And this summer, the then Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, and Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland, used the convening power of the UK and Canada to bring together 1500 representatives from over 100 countries to the world's first Global Conference for Media Freedom in London. I know many in this room were there and both Amal and I were delighted to be part of that landmark event.

Together with our Canadian friends, we asked ministers, leaders in civil society, academics, and of course, the media themselves – what are the challenges facing journalists and the media? How can we galvanise support in holding the powerful to account?

It is clear there are some countries who are unable to protect media freedom. And there are others who are simply unwilling to do so.

First, to those unable to protect media freedom. We know that creating legislative protections in domestic law, and I'm sure that will come up in our discussions this morning, provides the foundations for media freedom.

So we are encouraging countries around the world to sign the campaign's Global Pledge, and to live up to the commitments within it.

Today, I am proud to announce that I believe 30 governments have signed the Global Pledge, and in doing so, we have become founding members of the new Media Freedom Coalition.

For each signatory, being part of this Coalition means that laws within our own countries will be held to the highest of standards. But some countries need technical support to turn their ideals into legal protections.

So we are delighted to support the independent high-level panel of legal experts, which has been convened by Amal to advise countries on how to strengthen their legal protection of journalists, whether it's advising governments on new international commitments or indeed assisting with the repeal of outdated or restrictive legislation.

All members must also ensure their country frameworks are up to task – and of

course the United Kingdom is no exception.

So we are taking steps to establish a National Committee on the Safety of Journalists, tasked with developing a National Action Plan to ensure that those who threaten journalists are held to account.

And a new dedicated international Task Force, led by UNESCO, will assist governments around the world in developing their own plans, tailored to the needs of their own legal systems.

Next, we must protect journalists and help them avail themselves of these legal resources. With that in mind the second prong of our approach is helping journalists enforce those legal protections.

The Global Media Defence Fund, administered by UNESCO, will support, train and indeed provide legal support and advocacy for journalists in the most dangerous scenarios, whether it's covering the Taliban on the battlefields of Afghanistan or cartel violence in Mexico.

The UK government has already pledged £3 million worth of support for this new fund and I strongly encourage those gathered here today to consider making a commitment and contribution too.

And third part of our strategic approach: we will act as the advocacy group to lobby those who are not just unable, but also importantly unwilling, to sign up to the commitments currently in the Global Pledge.

And we will raise our voices on behalf of journalists who have been imprisoned or indeed tragically murdered.

Ultimately, we need every country to recognise that attacks on media freedom are beyond the pale. And just like any assault on human rights, and I speak as the UK Human Rights Minister, we must hold abusers accountable, both legally and financially.

We want to make sure that no profit comes from serious human rights violations or abuses anywhere in the world.

So when we leave the European Union, we will be introducing a UK Magnitsky law.

This will allow the United Kingdom to impose sanctions in the form of barring entry and freezing assets against anyone is responsible for the most serious human rights violations or abuses, and yes that includes against journalists or whistleblowers.

And we won't give up the fight for justice on behalf of those who have suffered or been killed. More than two years has passed since the death of young freelance journalist Christopher Allen in South Sudan. But sadly no investigation has taken place into this murder. We are re-doubling our efforts to ensure justice for Christopher and for his family.

Many remain imprisoned such as Erick Kabendera in Tanzania. Others such as

Maria Ressa from the Philippines, here with us today, live under threat of prosecution.

In every case, your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, in every case and on behalf of every journalist and indeed every family, we will continue to press for justice and accountability to keep the flame of media freedom burning in some of the darkest corners of the world, where the work of reporters is so very, very important.

In concluding, I'm touched by and I'm sure many of us recount, in a speech before she was killed, the renowned Sunday Times war correspondent Marie Colvin once described her work as "send[ing] home that first rough draft of history." She died doing just that.

But with each abuse of power against media, those drafts of history – and the reporters who bear witness to them – risk being lost.

Our mission, simply put, is to secure those basic freedoms for the media around the world. But I fully accept it is not an easy task.

It won't be accomplished with the will of the few. It will take the absolute commitment and resolve of the many.

We hope we can count on your support. Because those who ultimately put their lives on the line every day in pursuit of the truth deserve no less. Thank you.